# CONVERTED

April 16, 1989

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
John 21:15-19
Acts 9:1-20

**"...and suddenly a light from heaven flashed...and...a voice... And he said 'Who are you, Lord?' And he said, 'I am Jesus;...rise and enter the city....'"** -Acts 9:3-6 (RSV)

The topic this morning is conversion, and I suppose there is no subject that makes us more uncomfortable. Jimmy Dean used to tell a wonderful story about an evangelistic, fire and brimstone preacher in the back hills of Tennessee. He was on a kind of roll, bearing down heavily on the sinfulness of his listeners and God's demanding love. And, as is the case with that style of pulpit delivery, his listeners were responding, helping him out, cheering him on. "Amen. Tell it brother. Praise the Lord..." He was turning his attack to the moral implications of the Gospel, how strong drink was the work of the devil... "Amen, tell it brother," and tobacco, snuff, pipes... and suddenly a voice from the back pew: "Now you've stopped preachin' and gone to meddlin.'"

The topic does make us uncomfortable because of its propensity to meddle in our affairs. Our deepest beliefs are private, privileged, and besides, there is an attitudinal presumptuousness on the part of the newly converted toward those they regard as not yet converted that is very simply uncharitable, un-Christlike.

We are offended, rightly, by the attitude exhibited by the newly reborn - that the rest of us are living in darkness and ignorance. I find it particularly irritating when a person who has spent a lifetime in the church, nurtured by loving parents, taught by Sunday School teachers, the recipient of the church's ministry, announces one day at the age of twenty-five that he/she has found the Lord and become a Christian - as if everything before was sub-Christian, if not pagan. I have problems with the theology and the psychology of that.

And of course, for many of us there is a direct relationship between conversion and the heavy-handed pleadings of the new born again evangelicals.

Before the day of televangelism there were traveling evangelists - child evangelists; the name itself makes us recoil, those of us who know about the developmental sensitivities of children and believe the religious task is one of nurturing, loving and accepting. But they were called child evangelists and their goal was to persuade children to be converted. They came to town with the theological equivalent of a traveling medicine show, setting up a tent, or working out of the back of a station wagon at Summer Vacation Bible school; and they were very, very good. Magic tricks were a favorite lead in, and puppets, with music sung and played, and then the part I loved best.

The lights would go out except for a few colored spotlights on a flannel board, and with sweet music on the electronic organ he told the story of Saul of Tarsus on the way to Damascus to persecute Christians. He put the cloth figures up on that board as the story proceeded: cocky, arrogant, mean Saul, so sure of himself, so cruel and contemptible - on his way to break up families and to tear mothers and fathers away from their children for believing in Jesus. Then the blinding light, Jesus speaking to him and Saul falling down, blind, helpless and weak. Good old Ananias is there, just in the nick of time to get him indoors, a little nervous about Saul's unsavory reputation; and Paul regaining his sight and turning into the mightiest warrior Jesus ever had fighting on his side. The pictures of Paul left no doubt that we were seeing something new and spectacular: Saul, now Paul was taller, cleaner- shaven, stood straighter and smiled. And then - lights still out, organ playing sweetly - the evangelist would turn to the gathered assembly and suggest that what happened to Saul can happen to anyone if we just ask for it, listen for the voice: everyone can become new and good and strong and whole. In the darkness, with the organ still playing: if you can hear Jesus calling your name, just raise your hand and if you will just come forward and kneel here in the front. The small hands sneaked up in the darkness and the children came, not sure whether to be happy or terrified, not knowing what to expect, hoping their friends wouldn't catch wind of it, and if they did, hoping they'd be as accepting as Jesus was supposed to be.

The topic makes us uncomfortable, and meaning no disrespect, there are good enough reasons for our discomfort... Although, if I had to choose between the exploitation of children practiced by the old tent evangelists and that practiced by American toy manufacturers who bludgeon our children with commercials and violent cartoons, I'll take my chances with the evangelist.

Nonetheless, the topic makes Presbyterians nervous. In his classic Chicago, City on the Make, Nelson Algren describes Dwight L. Moody, "going about the streets straight-arming people with the simple and terrible question, 'Are you a Christian?'" [p. 18]

And that was before the travesty of televangelism, which magnifies a thousand times over the mild manipulations of the old traveling evangelists. It was said of Billy Sunday that when he preached you could feel the flames of hell licking around the wooden legs of your folding chair. And if you have ever taken the time to watch a carefully orchestrated and choreographed televangelism show you know you are watching something new and powerful and enormously influential.

So it makes good Presbyterians nervous and for very good reason. And yet, if it is about anything, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is about change, transformation of society and also of the individual. It is about making a decision and then living it out.

There aren't many things about which Christians agree, but about this we are virtually of one mind - that human nature can stand some improvement, some change for the good; that natural human nature is inclined to mess things up thoroughly.

It's not that we haven't tried to see it the other way, i.e. that human nature is basically good. We can still become romantic about the notion of the noble savage, untouched by civilization, the natural human being who is by nature just, honest, selfless, but the notion doesn't hold up.

The simple fact seems to be that human beings are programmed for selfishness, inclined to see the world from our own perspective, with ourselves at the center. We want to be god, it appears, and when we get together in tribes, clans, nations, cultures, our self-centeredness grows in quantum leaps and we find it easy to convince ourselves that we are destined to rule and the others are our inferiors.

Sin is what we used to call it and still do, this inherent selfishness, this inclination of the human soul to "curve in upon itself," in Luther's memorable image. We live for ourselves, unless we put something else in the center of our being, unless we place God there, accept the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

That is what conversion is...

And so, let's go back and look again at one of our original stories... In the time immediately following the death and resurrection of Jesus, the community of his friends and followers in towns and villages around Galilee came to be known as Church. And the church, at first a part of the synagogue in those places, gradually separated, and the residue of feeling was not often positive. Tempers flared - "You crucified him - But you have blasphemed God - insulted Yahweh." When possible the synogogue persuaded Rome to help root out the church. Of course, among those self-appointed prosecutors was a young zealot named Saul of Tarsus, strong, energetic, passionately committed to his own faith. Saul is on the way to Damascus - a one-man "committee on subversive activity," eager to identify and destroy the young heretical movement called church. It is on the road that it happens.

Flannery O'Connor quipped that she "reckoned the Lord knew that the only way to make a Christian out of that one was to knock him off his horse." [see William Willimon, Interpretations, The Acts of the Apostles, p. 73]

Something like that is exactly what happened to young Saul of Tarsus apparently. There was a bright light and a voice and he was blinded and rendered speechless, although the people with him seem not to have noticed

much; so perhaps we shouldn't take the lights and voices too literally. In any event the result is that an enemy of Jesus becomes an apostle; a persecutor of the church, once the initial shock fades, becomes a brother with a new Latinized name - Paul. And next to his Lord, it is simply not possible to imagine the history of the Western world without him.

Notice the personal nature of the experience. Saul's life is being turned around, but other people with him are essentially unaffected.

Notice that the experience is both conversion - and also commissioning: that Saul is changed from enemy to friend for the purpose of serving his Lord. That is, the experience is not simply for his own spiritual edification and gratification, but in order to launch him into a lifetime of extraordinary purposefulness and intentionality.

Notice that the result of the experience was to render him sightless and speechless, helpless actually, newly modest, a "know-it-all" become a learner: and how unlike most of the newly converted people I have known, who suddenly know all the answers.

Notice that this experience sets Paul on a new journey, that becoming a Christian for him is a process, not an event.

What happened to Saul of Tarsus has, in one way or another, happened to a lot of people in history.

William James wrote a classic in 1902 called The Varities of Religious Experience in which he suggested that some people come to their religious insights in one, great moment of revelation. And others come to their religious insights along the way of a life-long pilgrimage. Conversion can be either, event or process, apparently.

Rollo May, writing about Carl Jung's analysis of the unconscious in our psychological make-up observes that "the more we are unconsciously smitten with doubts about an idea, the more dogmatically we fight for it in our conscious arguments. This is why persons as different as St. Paul and the alcoholic in the Bowery go through such radical conversions." [The Courage to Create, p. 62]

Unfortunately there was nobody there to debrief St. Paul, so we don't know for sure, but it is not unreasonable to imagine that on occasion the thought occurred to him that the Jesus he was convinced was God's enemy, just might be God's son... that these very people he was exposing and arresting were actually right.

He had, after all, the Acts of Apostles reports earlier, watched an angry mob stone Stephen to death, had held their coats, as a matter of fact; stood there watching as young Stephen, a contemporary of his, died for Jesus... had heard Stephen's haunting last words - "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit - do not hold this sin against them." [Acts 7:59-60]

So perhaps there was something going on in Saul's mind, as he walked along toward Damascus. Perhaps it was not sudden at all. It has happened repeatedly but not always instantaneously and not always with clarity.

Dwight Moody was so vague about what he believed that he was turned down the first time he tried to join a church and then one day, as he wrote later, "I walked out upon Boston Commons and heard the birds singing in the trees, I thought they were all singing a song to me... it seemed to me that I was in love with all creation."*

Soren Kierkegaard wrote in his diary - 10:30 a.m., May 19, 1881 - "There is an indescribable joy."*

T. S. Eliot bears his witness as in Ash Wednesday, the poem, a man turns and turns on a winding stairway.*

And C. S. Lewis wrote a book about his journey from atheism to faith Christianity; how "Christianity was mainly associated for me with ugly architecture, ugly music and bad poetry" and called it Surprised by Joy.*

*[See Hugh T. Kerr and John M. Mulder, Conversions]

Frederick Buechner, in his autobiographical book, The Sacred Journey, tells how as a young man, he was intrigued with the intellectual sharpness of the preaching of George Buttrick at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York and how once he heard Buttrick talk about Jesus Christ being crowned king in the heart of believers among confession and tears and great laughter. Buechner writes:

"It was the phrase 'great laughter' that did it, did whatever it was that I believe must have been hidden in the doing all the years of my journey up till then. It was not so much that a door opened as that I suddenly found that a door had been open all along which I had only just stumbled upon..." [The Sacred Journey, p. 110]

What is it - this process we've been discussing? It is God - confronting, encountering people - in Jesus Christ. It is God, choosing, bearing in on, sometimes making things uncomfortable for individual men and women. It's a God, of holy love forcing the decision and in the process offering the gift of full life to people who are choosing to live just half a life.

It is also struggle, doubt, argument. It is resistance, out of simple human inertia because change is not something any of us welcomes, or because we know intuitively that the topic is about ultimate things and if we ever let ourselves begin to deal with it, actually allowed a little of the light and voice to penetrate, we might find that our relationships, our priorities, how we spent our time and money and how we voted, might all be changed.

Conversion is the process of change that happens to you and me when we allow God's love into our lives.

For most of us that is not going to be a once-and-for-all shattering experience. Not everybody has a Damascus Road experience. It is not a model for everyone. For most of us it is going to be a process.

The fact of the matter is that the life of faith is a growing, a becoming - regardless of where it begins.

We are Christians and we are becoming Christians.

We are saved and we are in the process of being saved.

We are converted and we are converting.

It is a process, for most of us, and it will continue every day of our lives.

It is always a commissioning. For some of us it means stopping dead in our tracks, turning around and going another direction. For some of us it means a new vocation, cashing in, packing up and going back to school... a broker becomes clergyperson, an ad executive becomes a social worker and it works the other way too... a minister signs up for an M.B.A. For some it means radical, vocational change, but for all of us this conversion business is a commissioning to service. "Do you love me, Peter?" Jesus asked in one of the Bible's most dramatic conversion accounts. And Peter, with increasing desperation answers, "You know Lord that I love you." And Jesus says, "Feed my sheep."

The way you are converted is not simply by enjoying an emotional experience, however sweet it might be, nor is it by finally figuring out how the source of all being inhabits humanity in a tightly reasoned doctrine of incarnation. It is by feeding sheep... The evidence always in every age is that: children tutored, hungry fed, homeless sheltered, unlovely loved.

In a good little book about creativity, Rollo May describes the experience of artistic breakthrough in terms that sounded to me remarkably like religious conversion...

"What occurs in this breakthrough is not simply growth: it is much more dynamic. It is not a mere expansion of awareness; it is rather a kind of battle. A dynamic struggle goes on within a person between what he or she consciously thinks on the one hand and, on the other, some insight, some perspective that is struggling to be born. The insight is then born with anxiety, guilt, but also joy and gratification." [op. cit., p. 62, 63]

I think everyone of us knows a little bit about that - about the dynamic struggle that goes on inside us between what we think we know for sure and a new insight struggling to life. We know, I think, about the painful birth struggle of the self that goes on every day of our lives.

I've seen it. Anyone who has ever talked to another human being about the meaning of his or her life, about dissatisfaction, frustration, aspirations, hopes, new goals, new possibilities, knows about the pain and passion of a new birth. I've been moved by it, when people I know change their lives, change jobs, change attitudes.

It is a process, this business of being converted to Jesus Christ.

And it is God's project. God initiates it, knocks a few people down now and then, but is always confronting, encountering.

It began for some in the darkness of a church service, when we sneaked a hand up in the air and hoped no one noticed - only to discover over the years that someone did notice, someone who has kept at it, has kept confronting us.

And for some it was accompanied by bright lights and voices and for many, many others of us, it is accompanied by quiet hours of doubt, struggle, reflection, hope and sometimes love, laughter and high, holy joy.

Sometimes it is a road to some Damascus and sometimes it is Michigan Avenue, or LaSalle Street, or I-94.

The promise to which I gladly bear witness is that the Lord Christ will continue to pursue you, will never give up, will continue to encounter us, and that daily we will be given the responsibility, the privilege, of making our decision.

The promise is that the Lord Christ will find you and call your name in a voice you may not immediately recognize... and that the meaning and purpose of your life is somehow dependent on your response.

"Saul, Saul... Who are you Lord? I am Jesus."

Amen.